



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 20

Issue 6 *Women's Movements and the Shape of Feminist
Theory and Praxis in Latin America, Part 1*

Article 8

Jun-2019

Demanding Justice and Security: Indigenous Women and Legal Pluralities in Latin America

David Carey Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>

 Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws)

Recommended Citation

Carey, David Jr. (2019). Demanding Justice and Security: Indigenous Women and Legal Pluralities in Latin America. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(6), 111-113.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss6/8>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Rachel Sieder ed., *Demanding Justice and Security: Indigenous Women and Legal Pluralities in Latin America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018. Pp. 299, index.

Reviewed by David Carey Jr., Loyola University

Committed to collaborative research, the scholar-activists whose essays comprise *Demanding Justice and Security: Indigenous Women and Legal Pluralities in Latin America* highlight how indigenous women in different parts of Latin America experience, conceptualize, and pursue security and justice. With one of the highest levels of violence against women in the world, Latin America offers a plethora of opportunities to understand these phenomena as they relate to gender-based violence. While the United Nations has recognized domestic violence and impunity from it as one of the major drivers of female migration from Central America, the contributors to this volume focus on those that remain behind. The narratives relay that shared traditions, culture, and rituals bind them with their male counterparts. Indigenous women explain how patriarchal aspects of manifestations of ethnicity have marginalized them. Despite the complementarity between men and women in many indigenous worldviews, indigenous men, legal experts, and authorities regularly insist that women's rights are not compatible with indigenous rights and thus, the two cannot be integrated. Indigenous women struggle to advance their interests in communities where patriarchal customs are the norm and attempts to challenge them are portrayed as attacks on indigenous culture. Struggles to denounce violence and (re)establish security are the threads that weave the volume's essays together.

In addition to focusing emic lenses on local realities and cultures, indigenous women and the scholar-activists who write about and with them articulate how external forces such as war, organized crime, and national governments have shaped their sense of security and access to justice. Facing threats to their well-being, at once internal (gender and power hierarchies) and external (racism and stigmatization about cultures of violence) to their communities, indigenous women often depict violence on a continuum from individual physical attacks on their bodies and the precariousness of everyday life to structural problems that inhibit their access to health care and degrade the environment. In her essay, Mariana Mora finds that in some regions such as mountainous Guerrero (Mexico), distant health care introduced new sources of violence. Poor women who could not afford transportation were sometimes raped as they walked to the health clinic for child wellness visits. Adriana Terven Salinas notes in her contribution, for some Nahua women in Mexico, attacks on their relationship to culture and nature such as herbicides that degrade the environment and diminish herbal medicines and thus spiritual healing are more significant grievances than domestic violence. Such conceptualizations of violence reveal much about indigenous cultures and worldviews. Indigenous women explain to Natalia de Marinis that an individual rape is a collective harm; one group of women emphasized that cutting a victim's hair was a greater offense against "being a woman" than rape because the shame associated with the short hair could not be concealed.

In her empirical essay, the editor of *Demanding Justice y Security*, Rachel Sieder discusses the roles of civic associations in striving for greater gender parity as well as the promotion of holistic health services that resonate with indigenous approaches to healing. Groups such as K'iche' organizations in Chichicastenango worked with indigenous midwives, who enjoy

authorial positions not merely around natal care but also marriage counseling. One of the major benefits of collaborative research that responds, “to indigenous logics and objectives” (269) is how it facilitates healing as well as data collection and analysis. To help victims of domestic violence address their suffering, *susto* (fright), *tristeza* (sadness), and pain, K’iche’ leaders contracted an indigenous spiritual guide and healer who deployed “ancestral treatments . . . that included massage, breathing, herbal and plant infusion, offerings, and various techniques to express feelings and release negative energies” (86). Nahua women similarly used indigenous resources like the *temascal* (traditional steam bath) to facilitate healing. In her chapter, Leonor Lozano Suárez notes that Nasa women in Cauca, Colombia emphasize the importance of cultivating and researching medicinal plants and revitalizing ancestral health epistemologies and techniques such as *sobanderas* (massage therapists) and *pulseadores* (who sense blood movements). In all these efforts, spirituality is central to healing.

Pluralism marks the rich, thick descriptions of indigenous women’s lives, worldviews, and possibilities in Latin America. The essays examine Me’phaa, Na’sau, Mixteco, Nahua, Moxipol, and Triqui peoples in Mexico, Kichwas in Ecuador and Bolivia, a coalition of Nasa and other ethnic groups in Colombia, and Mayas in Guatemala. By analyzing those groups, alternative epistemologies and world views emerge that provide multiple road maps to more secure and just realities for indigenous women and other marginalized citizens in Latin America. Potential strategies could be clearer and perhaps more efficacious had the authors offered a nuanced view of hegemonic forces. Instead the contributors tend to portray government, military, police and even paramilitary and extrajudicial organizations as adhering to a shared culture of power. Even when interlocutors open windows into the complexity of hegemony, some authors refrain from pursuing it. In response to the government’s efforts to arrest indigenous resistance to the mining by the Canadian company Goldcorp in Guatemala, one Maya woman notes, “I told the soldiers that they don’t have to defend the company, because they are also sons of indigenous people” (229). In addition to highlighting how indigenous people are pitted against each other by government and corporate leaders, she suggests a weakness in that power structure that indigenous solidarity could exploit. At the same time, multinational corporations have coopted indigenous mayors and other leaders to undermine social movements.

The transnational nature of these movements emerges as indigenous women in Bolivia, Mexico, Ecuador, and Guatemala are informed by each other’s achievements and struggles. Kichwa women in Chimborazo, Ecuador, for example were inspired by the Zapatista women in Mexico and the 2007 Bolivian constitution.

The deep exploration of indigenous women’s experience with violence yields complex realities. How can Nahua women critique their own culture and gender relations when there is no word for violence in their language? In courtrooms, domestic violence victims explain, “He reached for me” or “he came after me” (58). Such ambiguity is particularly problematic when women’s main avenue to thwart domestic violence is through oral narratives, Terven Salinas observes. Triqui women from Mexico faced a different problem in articulating their struggle with domestic violence. Government officials who portrayed Triqui culture as “bellicose and belligerent” and Triquis as “barbarous and uncivilized” (244-45) considered domestic violence a natural extension of Triqui ethnicity, as Marinis explains. Armed with those stereotypes, authorities could refrain from addressing gender-based violence on the grounds they did not want to force acculturation by imposing Western ideas on indigenous ethnicity.

In many women’s conceptualizations of injustice, history plays a central role as Emma Cervone and Christina Cucurí demonstrate. Kichwa women in Chimborazo trace contemporary

Hispanic elites' and authorities' subordination and exclusion of *indígenas* to early twentieth century *hacienda* enterprises whereby foremen exploited indigenous laborers (122). After the hacienda system was abolished in the mid twentieth century, the Ecuadorean state's assimilationist discourse portrayed rural *indígenas* as impoverished and backwards (123). Associated with indigenous culture, clothing, and language, indigenous women became foils to indigenous men's forays into the nation's modernity.

The environment (particularly its degradation) too emerges as a central theme. Many indigenous women lament violence against it: deforestation, polluted water, agrochemicals. Their critiques are not simply odes to halcyon pasts, but examples of how economic development undermines their collective capacity to live with dignity. Nowhere is that more evident than in protests against Guatemalan mining, which has polluted water sources and compelled indigenous peoples to relocate.

This far reaching and richly researched volume is not without its shortcomings. For example, in the concluding chapter, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo and Terven Salinas laud testimonials like that of K'iche' leader Rigoberta Menchú compiled by anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos-Debray without problematizing them. Indeed, they assert, "There are few critical reflections on the social hierarchies that mark the relations between researchers and the social actors" (278). But the Menchú-Burgos-Debray testimonial controversy spawned numerous critical analyses that highlighted the complex and contested relationships between researchers and their collaborators. Such flaws do not detract from the valuable contribution this volume makes to understandings of indigenous women, gender relations, violence, and justice in Latin America.